

i will follow you into the dark by heartofwinterfell

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Summary:

She works in a diner and echoes every song in the jukebox like a songbird trying to forge her own melody. He writes copy for a second-rate board game series and stains the back booth with blue ink trying to spin his own legend.

Fate weaves them together as it unravels them apart, but she's never been one to abide easily by the rules of this world or the one underneath.

[eleven, mike, and the invention of a modern myth]

i will follow you into the dark

Author's Note:

me to me: please, for once in your life, be chill and write like a 3k fic

me back to me: how about instead, I write a 6k Orpheus AU with three different narrative strings?

me to me: you're truly the worst.

///

*love of mine,
someday you will die*

“No matter what you’ve heard, the road to hell isn’t paved with good intentions, kid.”

Kali gives her a ball of deep red yarn. She cradles it in her hands like a holy treasure, even as the raw energy it radiates licks at her hands with its invisible flames. That’s what her mother used to say to her time and time again, “people like you, people like me, we carry the phantasmal scars of the universe.”

She’s to tie the red yarn around the skeletal white oak tree stump and she’s to trail it after her every inch she travels. It will be her only path back to human civilization when she and Mike climb out of the upside down.

There will be a river at the end of the underworld. Ultra silvam, they say, beyond the forest. The demon dogs stalk the wood, but if she makes it to the black sand banks of the river, she’ll see where the washed away souls go. She can catch his in her hands, cup it like her father cradled birds with broken wings, and she can set him free.

She can bring him back to her, in the place by her side where he’s supposed to be.

“Last time I’ll ask, but are you sure, Jane?” Kali presses three fingers

to the skin above her lip where the blood already trickles. She wipes it clean. Sister, Eleven thinks with undying affection.

“Yes.”

She walks into Mirkwood - his name - and let's the gateway to the underworld draw her forth like a beacon, calling her to take back her home.

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*i've just seen a face,
i can't forget the time or place*

“Please, end me now,” Max groans as the guitar opening rips through the diner. “And when I'm gone, tell my step-brother I hate his guts.”

She swipes her rag once across a recently vacated booth, Max's version of good cleaning. El sweeps her broom across the pink and white tile floor to the beat of the Beatles. She hums along with McCartney, slides her feet across the squeaky floor, let's the jukebox sound wash over her. Music as it's meant to be played: out of a genuine relic in the Hawkins Diner as the clock ticks close to one in the morning.

She and Max have an hour and a half left on the graveyard shift, so Max began her moans and groans two hours ago. But El likes this time best, when everything in her universe feels more visceral because she gets a greater share of the world's sensations while everyone else lays fast asleep.

The bell on the front door chimes and Eleven swings around the greet the new guest, only to freeze, feet glued to the floor.

It's Mike Wheeler who just walked through the door.

"Hey, take a seat wherever," Max tells him, waving a hand around the near empty diner.

Mike does not move. He's standing as stock still as she is, returning her surprised gaze. Then in tandem, they both take a step forward. An old muscle memory returning, taking them back to the times when they did everything in perfect parallel.

And seeing him again does open the floodgates of memory. Of meeting him in middle school when she and Hopper only just moved in with the Byers and Will's friends became her friends. Of riding their bikes down cul-de-sacs and wooded trails or walking down the old train tracks and exploring the junkyard. Of watching *Star Wars* and *E.T.* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* with the lights down low and listening to Dustin and Lucas fight over the popcorn bowl. Of quietly observing campaigns and marveling at his mind, his creativity, his drive. Of Snow Balls, and summers, and sweet sixteens.

Of a myriad of almost's and one day's.

Of him leaving, indefinitely, and her staying right where she was.

Of losing touch because it was a little too painful to think her almosts became someone else's definitives.

But here he is, standing in front of her now, as if tugged back by the invisible red strings of fate.

"Mike," she breathes out, at last.

"Eleven." His smile breaks like a new day on his face. She's always loved the morning glow of it.

"So I'm thinking you two know each other," Max says from behind the counter. "The back booth's free. Maybe take the gushy catching up over there."

They slide into either side of the booth, still just staring at each other. The jukebox gears up another Beatles song. Max grunts from the kitchen. The ensuing laughter lifts away some of the tension.

"You're back," El says softly, eyes roaming his face for signs of

change. He's older - they all are - and too skinny, Joyce will say, but he has the same curious eyes and same comforting smile. It puts El further at ease, seeing that time does not widdle away as much as she thought.

"Yeah!" Mike says, staccato and bright, a little overeager. He blushes and lowers his voice a little, "Yes, it was kind of last minute. I got this job that lets me work anywhere and Lucas, Dustin, and Will were all planning on coming home for at least a year, so...I came back, too."

"What's the job?" El asks, quietly desperate for a further peek into his life.

"Oh," Mike ducks his head, blush creeping further up his neck. "It's nothing interesting. I'm just writing some advertisements for this fantasy board game. It has something to do with cones? It's complicated."

El laughs, thinking back to Mike's elaborate campaigns that stretched on for ten, fifteen hours, and wonders how complicated it really must be. "So you're still writing."

Mike shrugs, studying the streaky table. "I'm trying to. I keep telling myself I'm going to start writing my earth shattering fantasy series, but -" He shrugs again.

"If it's anything like all our old D&D campaigns..." El says, nudging his foot under the table.

"The bard and ranger character are going to fight a lot."

They laugh until three in the morning when Max kicks Mike out, so she can do more of her non-cleaning. El walks Mike to the door and flips the sign to closed, idles a little in the doorway as she watches him walk down the steps.

He stops suddenly and turns back to her just as she's about to close the door.

"Do you want to, maybe, see a movie sometime this week?" Mike asks. Eleven's heart soars.

When she's back in the diner, back with her broom, dancing badly across the floor to a Ronettes tune, Max shakes her head at her in fond exasperation. "I'm going to have to see a lot more of this, aren't I."

Eleven answers by singing the chorus at the top of her lungs. The lights are shining a little too brightly in the diner, her powers leaking out. Her aunt says she needs better control over her moods, lest the wrong people catch her flexing her magic. But tonight, with only Max here, Eleven loses herself in the happiness.

Max rolls her eyes, but her foot is tapping along, too. "Please, end us all now."

///

*and i know when it rains it pours
and i know i was born to be yours*

Mike races thirty blocks home in the pouring rain. He's wearing his clothes like a second skin by the time he reaches his apartment, but the first thing he does is pick up his phone.

Nancy answers on the second ring, "Hello?"

"I met her," Mike says, so fast the words form together.

"Met who?"

"The girl I'm going to spend the rest of my life with."

Nancy laughs on the other end, sounds caught off guard. "Geez Mike, you never struck me as that much of a hopeless romantic."

How did Mike explain to Nancy that it felt like his reality shifted completely when he met this girl? How did he describe the emotions that flooded him when their eyes met for the first time, almost as though he's looked into those eyes a thousand times before?

Because Nancy's right, he's never been like this before. He went from a nerdy kid who felt lucky when a girl talked to him to a young adult cautious of being walked all over. That's what makes today that much more visceral and life alerting. These feelings are raw and overwhelming and real.

"Mike!"

Mike snaps back from his reverie. "What?"

"I asked what's her name."

He primes himself for Nancy to laugh. "Eleven."

Nancy's quiet for a moment. "Huh." She pauses again. Mike wishes she could see her face, better guess what she's thinking of. But that's nothing new. There's a part of him that will constantly miss her now that they're separated by an ocean. "Sorry, that name just seemed so familiar. I think it's nothing."

"Monster hunting's making you a little crazy, Nance," Mike jokes, as though he's not teetering on the knife's edge of crazy himself.

She huffs and they move onto Nancy's job, and her unofficial one, to Jonathan, and to Holly, and to mom's impending divorce. The world spins on like normal, but Mike still feels his has been rocked. Like something's come together for him, against all odds.

///

The road to hell is not paved with good intentions, but with muck and slime and grime that sticks to her coat and the soles of her shoes, making the path slow to travel.

It's tangly, too, like spiderwebs spinning around her, trying to trap her by the sensitive skin of her wrist or the vulnerable back of her neck. "*It will know you're there,*" Kali had said, "*from the very moment you pass through the gate. It will try to trick you at every step of the way.*"

She continues down the tunnel by sheer will alone, always careful to keep clutching the ball of yarn. It trails after her, pristine, untouched by the muck. Pure magic, she thinks, and soldiers on.

She emerges in the diner, it's upside down counterpart. Dark, covered in pulsing vines that crawl up the scorched walls and wrap around the stools and counters, washed out of any color. She pulls her ruby scarf tighter over her mouth, breath shallow. The flecks of white are littered in the air, poison snow, deadly to inhale, eventually even for her.

The jukebox sputters to life, a queued song crackling out of the speakers. Eleven knows that piano introduction, has always relished its timbre.

“It will know who you are,” Kali had warned her, “And worse, it will know what you want.”

Does it hope she'll stop here, waste her time away at the pale imitation jukebox, that's dim glow and shaky sound cannot cross the distance between it and her heart.

She unfurls her yarn as she steps out the door, humming Daydream Believer on her own beat.

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*you once thought of me
as a white knight on his steed*

“Did it scare you?” he asks, as they follow the flow of the crowd exiting the special midnight showing of *The Thing*.

They idle outside of the Hawkins Movie Theater, neither wanting to go home just yet, ready to stand under the yellow glow of the marquee until lights went out.

"A little bit," she admits, beyond the blood and gore and freezing in the snow, it did scare her. "The idea of losing who you are, but no one being able to tell."

"I don't think that could ever happen to you," Mike says and when El looks at him, really looks at him, his cheeks are scarlet.

"Why's that?"

"I'd know the real you anywhere."

They have their first kiss outside that theatre and it stretches until they kill the lights. And maybe it's six or seven years late. El's impatient - gets it from her father and her mother - but she's happy she waited. She can't help thinking this was how it's supposed to be.

///

*the spotlight, shines upon you
And how could anybody deny you*

"And the main monster has this -...this hive mind, ya know?" He draws frenzied black ink lines on a paper napkin, the long-legs of this near arachnid, and the thin paper tears. "Someone else will have to illustrate."

"My brother Will's a great artist," she says. He loves hearing about her family. Her mantic mother who speaks in premonitions, her sheriff father with his gruff edges, her stepmother willing to brave hellfire for her family, her photographer older brother, and artist practically twin. She's the girl legends are built around.

He's been coming to the coffee shop diner daily since he learned she was hired. He hoards the back booth like a dragon with its bounty, and he writes and writes and writes. He prefers longhand now, likes seeing his ideas scrawled out on the page.

And he might have to meet Will. He's starting to think his story would be best as a graphic novel. He already has a vision in mind for the main character.

"It needs a great name - the monster."

"Something like demogorgon," Eleven says with a teasing smile.

Sometimes, it's like she has him read like a favorite book, the one you know by heart, all the words inside precious, down the "a's" and "the's."

"You know, sometimes," she continues, "the scariest monsters of all don't have names. They just exist there, in the darkness, and they're happy because no one knows to look for them."

Mike puts his pen down and reaches across the table, hand slipping into hers. "I'll learn its name and I'll defeat it, for you."

Eleven smiles, softly serious. "Not if I defeat it for you first."

///

Mirkwood upside down is less a forest than a wall of darkness, a place where the light of a thousand variable stars could not reach.

For the first time, she has to entrust the ball of yarn to one hand as she uses the other to spark a small ball of light hovering over her right palm. It tickles her synapses - it always has. She remembers her mother, glowing blue at every fingertip, tracing along the lines of her palm to tell happy futures. And to the ends of securing a happy future, she walks into the wood.

She learns quickly the forest is not only a wall of darkness, but a dam to sound. It's oppressively silent as she forges her path. She treads on inky leaves and snarling vines and there's never a rustle or crunch. When she presses her lips together to hum a familiar tune, the music gets swallowed up, snuffed out.

“You shouldn’t be here,” a voice growls in her mind. It sounds almost like Will, or Will as he would be if he wasted away down here, had his mind spliced with madness. *“No one wants you here. Not your father, not your mother, not your sister, not your brothers.”*

She shakes her head, wishing to knock the voice loose. It persists, invasive and unrelenting. *“What a waste, they’ll say, when you never come back. What a waste of such power, and what a waste of our love.”*

The tears fall hot and fast down her cheeks. Sight and sound do not exist here, but she can taste the salt on her tongue, feel the stickiness of her cheeks. She holds fast to the sensations.

“And all for what? The fleeting love of a silly boy?”

“No!” The scream bursts through the sound barrier. The trees ripple around her, the vines recede. She hears the whimper of a dog retreating from behind her, but that may be only in her mind.

Her little light pulses and pulls her onward, the path to the center of the labyrinth unfolding in front of her. The light extinguishes itself when, at last, she steps out of the trees. Ultra silvam, she remembers. She’s beyond the forest.

And the river’s there, iridescent.

I’m here, Mike, she thinks, I’m here.

///

*but of all these friends and lovers
there is no one compares with you*

“An apple,” he holds out the Golden Delicious to her, shining perfect in his palm, “For the most beautiful girl in the orchard.”

“Ew,” Max says off to the side, crunching her own apple between her teeth, bits spraying onto the grass.

“It’s okay,” Lucas says, beside her. “We all know who the true most beautiful girl in the orchard is.”

“Ewww,” Max says, louder and longer, as she ducks out of the way of Lucas’s cheek kiss. She darts through the trees, Lucas chasing after her. Will and Dustin are doubled over laughing a little ways away. The crisp fall breeze blows Mike’s fringe into his bright eyes. They’re laughing, too. The orchard’s rich with it.

She takes the apple out of his hand and presses it to her lips, not biting yet. She wants to preserve it a little longer, this silly token of his love, because it’s truly turning gold in the light of the setting sun. If she focuses, long and hard, she could make metal, keep it forever.

She bites into instead, the juice dribbling down her chin. It’s the sweetest I-love-you she’s ever tasted. They walk hand in hand after their friends, snagging a few more apples as they go.

“This would be a good start to a story,” Mike says, swinging their arms between them. He has a red Macintosh apple in his other hand, so round and glistening it could be mistaken for cartoon poison.

“But wouldn’t that mean something bad is about to happen?” El asks, gripping his hand a little tighter.

“Not necessarily,” Mike answers. “It could just be all of us, going on a quest.”

All of them, off to fight cyclops or chimeras, El would read about that. But then again, there’s nothing Mike could say or write that would not interest her.

///

in a foreign place, the saving grace was the feeling

that it was a heart that he was stealing

“Is that it?”

The crowds are slow to drift out of the theater after the curtain falls and the lights come up. They weave through and walk palm to palm out onto the city street. It’s a clear night. The stars follow them as they walk to the bus station.

“Is what it?”

“Is that the end of the war? Achilles kills Hector and the Greeks win?” Eleven asks, looking genuinely disturbed by the very idea of that outcome.

Mike rifles through his hazy memory of high school Homer and shakes his head, “It’s not the end, but I think it’s a turning point. Achilles killed the Trojans best warrior.”

Eleven’s frown deepens. They’re silent until they reach the bus stop, when Eleven blurts out, “That’s a horrible way to end a play.”

Mike presses a finger to his lips, “Shh, Shakespeare might hear you.”

“Good,” she says, crossing her arms in pride. After only a millisecond, Mike misses the feeling of his hand in hers.

“You really liked Hector,” Mike observes, fiddling with fingers to stop himself from doing anything too impulsive.

“He reminds me of someone,” she says, taking a small step closer.

They have their first kiss at that bus station and it stretches until their number arrives. And as Mike sits watching the streets go by, Eleven’s head resting on his shoulder, he gets the strangest sense he’s done this all before. That there are memories buried deep in the recesses of his mind - his own, but not his own.

He looks down at the girl sleeping on his shoulder, brushes the hair off her forehead.

I’d know you anywhere, he thinks, like it’s the only truth he knows.

///

*tonight, you're mine completely
you give your love so sweetly*

The Shirelles are no stranger to the trailer and now Mike is not either.

His ceramic mug, hand-painted by Holly, has a shelf of its own on the top of her tallest cabinet because he can reach it best. He stocks her fridge with french vanilla creamer and keeps her sugar bowl full, so they drink coffee at one in the morning, his milky brown and hers a pitch black. He's never owned a record before so she surprises him one night with an Arctic Monkeys album nestled beneath her much loved Rubber Sole. They play AM from epicenter to final groove as they make up constellations out of the water stains on her ceiling.

She still likes playing her records best just as he likes to screen his black and white monster movies, but they're compromising, the word her father taught her when they tethered their lives to the Byers. If she can found a life on half the happiness of her father and Joyce, she'll bury herself in compromises.

The Shirelles ask will you still love me tomorrow?

Eleven Ives Hopper will love Mike Wheeler across all time.

"Why the 60s?" Mike asks, as one song bleeds into the next.

El hums, hand fiddling with his fingers where they're clasped over his heart. "It's bright and it's upbeat, even when it's not entirely happy. And it was new. Everyone tried something different, everyone tried to be who they wanted to be."

"Sounds like you," Mike murmurs into her hair.

“Why today?”

Mike rests his chin on the top of her head. “It’s all I’ve ever known,” he answers. “It’s the right kind of familiar.”

Mike’s the right kind of familiar, the kind that will always make her feel safe and wanted, but will also never stop surprising her, will never stop pushing her forward, helping her change and learn in the best ways. She may not stay in Hawkins forever, she may not always be under her father’s hand-me-down trailer roof. But she’s decided she’ll always be with Mike, no matter where either of them travel.

There’s nowhere she wouldn’t follow him.

///

She drops to her knees in the black sand at the bank of the river, but is careful not to touch her hand to the water.

Some souls are the deep purple of a velvet throne, their strength and steel still locked within them. Other souls are the pale yellow of a child’s much loved stuffed animal, their motherly love drifting along with them in the current. Many are green like the summer grass on a heath or green like a lime wedge or green like seaweed washed on the shore. A few change colors before her eyes, shade from magenta to olive, olive to tangerine.

How will I know, she asked Kali, how will I know which one is him?

Kali could not answer that. She said only El would know.

She closes her eyes and conjures up every time she’s ever looked at Mike Wheeler, really looked. She thought of the curve of his smile, the dust of freckles on his cheeks, the sweep of his hair, the tilt of his chin. She thought of that curved smile when he looked up at Holly perched on his shoulders when he walked her to school. The freckles from too much time eating melted ice cream under the blistering sun until their fingers grew sticky and their noses burnt. The sweep of his

hair that'd he let Max weave braids into, even as he knew the grander purpose was to poke fun at him. The tilt of his chin, down, when he kissed her.

She flicks through the pages of her memory, faster and faster, until the snapshots start glowing blue. The color of the stripes on his favorite sweater, the one she folded over her hands and snuggled into on the nights the trailer got a little too cold.

Her eyes fly open. Found you.

She crushes the ball of yarn between her knees and plunges her hands into the river. She catches the color in her hands and pulls.

Her hands emerge soaking wet and stained blue. Empty.

“No, no, no, no.”

“Eleven?”

///

*Why do the birds go on singing?
Why do the stars glow above?
Don't they know it's the end of the world
It ended when I lost your love*

There's no missing posters, no search parties, no vigils. Just an investigation her father can tell her nothing about.

She pounded her fists against his chest the third day of no contact, no news. She wanted to hurt him, hurt something, the way the universe has hurt her. In a feral rage, she blew a fuse. The lights flickered out, full dark, no stars. She collapsed against Hopper's chest, sobbing.

“I don't understand.”

“Neither do I, kid. Neither do I.”

Home base becomes the Hopper-Byers’ cabin. She sits with Joyce on the couch, accepts her arm around her shoulder. She hides out with Max on the porch where the atmosphere inside becomes too stifling. She makes breakfast with Jonathan in the kitchen in the very early mornings and brings it in to Nancy, who she hugs tightly, arms thrown around her neck. On the worst days, she curls up beside Will on the two small twin bed, like they used to do when they were twelve and one of them had a bad dream.

She loves all of them, so much. It makes it hurt more, that it’s not enough.

“It was the demogorgon,” she overhears Dustin whispering to Lucas and Will on the sixth night.

“What are you, nine,” Lucas snaps. “That’s a dumb Dungeons and Dragons character. This is real.”

It’s not a made-up monster, but Dustin’s words flick on the light switch in her head.

She packs her bag that night, doesn’t leave a note. She tiptoes through the living room, passing Dustin, Lucas, and Max squeezed tight on the couch. Max’s drooling on Lucas’s shoulder. Dustin’s snoring. She wants to take a picture.

Instead, she opens the front door. She allows herself one more look back at her best childhood home.

“I’ll be back,” she whispers, sooner than they’ll know.

Mike will be back with her.

///

“Mike!”

He's in front of her now, soul-soaked to the bone, stained in a million people's colors, but undoubtedly flesh and blood once more. He looks dazed, not all there in the eyes, but he'll fully return again when she gets them back to the surface. She knows he will.

Unable to wait a second longer, she runs for him.

She collides with an immovable object. She's a foot away from, his arms had opened for her to fall into, but she cannot move. She bangs her hands against the force field, but it does not crack.

"Eleven, where are we? What's happening?" Mike asks as he too begins frantically pounding at the invisible wall dividing them.

"The dead cannot touch the living," the voice whispers. *"Did your sister not tell you that?"*

"He's not dead," Eleven argues, "just missing."

She can feel it, in the back of her mind, bristling.

That's how she knows that Dustin was right. A monster did steal Mike from her. Just not a monster of fantastical nature. No, this one was made of much more ancient stuff.

"Very well," it says. "*You can have him back.*"

Eleven pushes forward. The wall reels her back. *"After one final trial."*

She nods. Anything.

"You will go back the way you came, follow you silly little string, and Mike will be allowed to follow." Her grips tightens around her lifeline. It sings for home. *"But if you look behind you to see if he follows, even once, he'll stay here forever."*

She casts her eyes to Mike. He knows there's something here with them, something she's conversing with that he cannot see. His jaw is set, his hands curled in fists by his sides. He wants to protect her and doesn't know how. Her body aches to reach out and unfurl that fist, interlock their fingers together and squeeze tight.

“Decide.”

She nods again. Anything.

///

*i couldn't utter my love when it counted
but i am singing like a bird about it now*

“Eleven?”

They're in his apartment, a Hozier song on low in the background, a kettle on the stove a few minutes away from whistling. Her head is on his chest, ear to his heartbeat. There's nothing special about this moment, nothing new. But his chest keeps constricting at the sight of her and he knows he has to say it before he internally combusts.

“I love you.”

They lock eyes.

“I love you, too.”

He leans in, but she stops, sitting up but grasping his hand tight.
“And you trust me, right?”

Mike nods, agreeing to the obvious.

“And you'll always believe me?”

Mike nods again, though he sits up too, worry creeping into his heart.

“We've done this all before, Mike.” Eleven grips his hand, hard, steadfast. “This isn't your original life.”

The kettle in the kitchen whistles, high and shrill and earth-shattering.

///

“You have broken your promise,” it hisses with glee.

It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair.

They had been so close, the mouth of gate and the shining moonlight beyond just within reach. That’s when it sent its Furies.

Their growls and barks echoed off the tunnel walls, their footsteps rumbled in the distance. She began seeing their shadows running beside her, phantom beasts on the wall. They chased after her heels, never close enough to draw blood, but always close enough.

Close enough to fear he was no longer behind her.

Close enough to fear they tore him down.

Close enough to turn around, to know he was safe, to know he was whole.

She had just enough time to grasp his hands in hers, but only that.

“You cheated,” El yells into the abyss. Her hands are empty and cold, red-stringed lifeline and Mike’s hand lost. In the dark, it laughs at her.

“No cheats here,” it titters, voice growing distant, retreating the depths of her mind. *“Now goodbye.”*

“No!” she screams for a second time. She feels its presence still lingering in the back of her mind and she grabs at it. “Compromise. I want a compromise.”

“No compromises.” It tugs at her hold on it, stretches her powers to its very limits as she strains to keep it there.

“There has to be something you want. Anything.”

It ceases struggling. “*Anything?*”

El nods. She can feel the blood on the crest of her lip, pooling in her ears. She’ll not have much longer before her tears run red, too.

“*I want this.*”

Her powers flare like a supernova, exploding through her body as it dissects them. In an instant, it explores depths of her powers she never knew existed, unlocks their intricacies, solves all their riddles that had once been to El impossible sphinxes. She can taste, and see, and feel, and hear the power - reach out and touch it like it’s something tangible - and it’s hers, all hers. Infinite and celestial, the bedrock of who she is and who she could be.

Then it recedes and she’s left hollow, razed.

Who will she be without this precious alchemy running through her veins?

But who will she be without Mike Wheeler there to make any of it worthwhile?

“Take it,” El says. “It’s yours.”

It all goes at once, floods out of her from the top of her head and the tips of her toes. When she takes her first breath in the aftermath, she feels weightless.

Is this how Atlas would feel, if he decided to drop the world?

In the moments after, there’s silence. El can sense it evading her, overpowered now with her gifts. But it’s tethered to her still, bound by ancient promise. “*You’ve gotten what you wanted. Now give me what you promised!*”

The tunnel trembles. El sways on her feet, holds up her arms to block the scattered debris that falls overhead. Then with a snap, everything stops.

“*There,*” it rumbles. “*Done.*”

“Where is he?” Eleven demands, low and threatening.

“*Out in the world,*” it answers, sounding all too pleased. “*Living his life.*”

Nothing about its answer fills her with relief. It’s too satisfied.

“*You really should have been more clear,*” it chastises, “*of where you wanted him to be.*”

In flashes like lightning, Eleven sees them shaking hands at twelve, their first time meeting, when he had a split lip from a fight with a bully and her hair was buzzed. They’re thirteen, walking side by side under the street lamps, him in his Ghostbusters costume and her holding her ghost sheet. They’re fifteen and lying on the top of the bus in the junkyard, wishing on comets. They’re sixteen, learning to drive. They’re twenty-two, laughing in the back booth of the Hawkins Diner.

“*This isn’t his life anymore,*” it tells her, “*these are only your memories now. And this -*”

El frantically shakes her head. She doesn’t want to see anymore.

The picture fast forwards. They’re twenty-five and they’ve rented their first apartment in Chicago, pseudo-arguing about painting the walls firetruck red. Another skip. They’re twenty-six and he proposes with a plastic gumball ring at a throwback 80s arcade because he can’t stand to wait any longer. They’re twenty-seven smashing red velvet cake into each other’s face. They’re twenty-eight and they’re visiting her mother. They’re twenty-nine and they gather all their families up together, crowded into the Hopper-Byers cabin, and share with them the incredible news.

“*None of this is yours.*”

A strong wind rushes through the tunnel, barrelling into her and thrusting her out of the gate. She lands on her back on the floor of Mirkwood. The stars glitter above her head, but they’re blurry, blocked by her tears.

She lets out a sob, her hands clawing in the dirt, reaching for the

yarn. It's gone. Everything's gone.

She lays there for what feels like hours, gazing up at the night sky but not finding any hope there. She thinks perhaps she and Mike were always meant to be star crossed, that her fighting against fate was only playing into the grand scheme of the universe.

She should find her way home, retreat into the steadfast comfort of her father's arms. Learn to content herself with knowing Mike is out there, somewhere, living a fuller life, the long one he deserves.

Her foot collides with something soft. Rubbing her eyes, she looks down. It's the ball of yarn, whole again. She picks up and still feels it's fierce energy on her nerve-endings, though duller now than it was before. Her only path back to human civilization. Her only path home.

Eleven cradles the ball close to her chest, next to her heart. It reacts to her heartbeat like a siren's call, and begins to set its course.

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The morning mist sticks on his lips and the tips of his eyelashes. Would he ever escape the constant feeling of being submerged full deep in a river, slippery souls sliding past him on their way to the underground?

He'll have to make a jailbreak from London one day. His heart has yearned for the states, oddly sung for the endless cornfields of Middle America.

For now, he'll have to content himself with the heart of the only city he remembers knowing, the city of his darkest urban fantasies. He ducks down a side-street, away from the hustling bustle of the main roads, and hurries the rest of the way to his favorite coffee shop.

It's more a diner than a coffee shop, or at least what he imagines a diner to be. It has waxy boothes and shiny tabletops and a jukebox

that plays the pop-lite love of the sixties and everything is washed over in red, a little too pure on the color spectrum that it hurts if you don't stare at it too long and let your eyes go blind to it. He prefers to the back booth and he takes his coffee black, though he's never sure why. He hates the hot bitter taste.

Mike settles into his booth and boots up his laptop. As he waits and waits and waits, he notices there's a new girl swivelling on a stool at the counter. Her hairs cropped short, her coat hangs long, her stare wide and wondering up at the menu. She's nothing like the joy-dead patrons who haunt here. She takes Mike's breath away.

She jumps off the stool and walks with purpose to the dusty-buttoned jukebox - no one ever spared a quarter for a song. But she slots in three and gives away her first to a rapid uptempo Beatles song. The guitar's opening chords strum along with Mike's heart.

*she's just the girl for me
and i want all the world to see we've met*

She pinpoints him across the length of the diner as though she knows he's been there all along, like he's been the thing she's been searching for all her life. When she crosses to him, with the same divine purpose she had walking over to buy a song, it feels all at once like an important piece of the universe has slotted itself into place.

On the other side of the table, she smiles at him, soft and sweet. Her hands are encased in warm knit gloves. He wants to hold those hands one day, if she'll let him.

He wipes his own sweating palms on jeans and stands, edge of table meeting stomach with an oof. She laughs, but not unkindly. He decides it's not a bad way to start things. After all, they could be meeting out cold in the rain.

"I'm Mike, uh, Mike Wheeler."

"Hi, Mike, uh, Mike Wheeler." She stretches her red-gloved hand into the void between them. "I'm Eleven."

He takes her outstretched hand as grasping a new lease on life and he

soars.

*if there's no one beside you when your soul embarks
then i'll follow you into the dark*

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Author's Note:

- 1) This is definitely an AU, but it has a lot of in universe parallels. I tried to keep parts of the backstory vague - especially the nature of Eleven's powers - because I was partially riffing off of Kelly Link's story "Flying Lessons" and what I love about that story is she doesn't explain any of the magic, it just exists.
- 2) I took a huge leap of faith with the timeline. Originally both Eleven and Mike's narration was their first relationship (old childhood friends turned lovers) but then I thought about how cool it could be to see Mike falling in love for the very first time in their second relationship and I ran with it.
- 4) And speaking of relationship 2.0...I'm not sure I love the scene where Eleven starts to tell Mike what went down. I know she has to eventually and it's not her fault, what happened, but ugh what a horrible conversation to have to have. It might end up changing in a couple of days, we'll see.
- 3) If you have any questions about song choices, myth references, why the timeline was so damn confusing, anything at all, I'll be happy to answer either here or at my tumblr (nancywheeler.tumblr.com)